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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL ECON ENRG EPET KV RU LO

SUBJECT: EUR DAS GARBER'S MARCH 13 MEETING WITH MFA
POLITICAL DIRECTOR SLOBODNIK

REF: 08 BRATISLAVA 483

Classified By: CDA EDDINS FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (U) This message contains an action request in paragraph 6.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY: EUR DAS Garber met with MFA Director General for Political Affairs Igor Slobodnik March 12 to discuss the impact of the ongoing economic crisis on Slovakia, Afghanistan, the Balkans, energy security, and Russia. Slobodnik lamented that, as a result of the global economic crisis, Slovakia would likely experience little-to-no GDP growth this year (a view confirmed in Garber's meetings that morning with National Bank of Slovakia Governor Ivan Sramko and a group of leading Slovak economic analysts). Slobodnik reiterated Slovak's determination to meet previous commitments in Afghanistan (i.e., to have about 250 troops there by June 2009). The Director General does not believe that significant new commitments are likely given the economic crisis, but he stressed that Slovakia remains open to proposals that could facilitate a Slovak-led OMLT. Slobodnik reiterated Bratislava's firm position against recognition of Kosovo, while underscoring Slovakia's desire to play a constructive role in the Western Balkans. He proposed regular consultations with the USG on energy security strategies and was cautiously optimistic regarding improved U.S.-Russian relations. Slobodnik concluded the meeting by underscoring the new Foreign Minister Lajcak's desire to visit the U.S. and meet with Secretary Clinton soon. END SUMMARY.

Economic Crisis

¶3. (U) Slobodnik, having just come from an MFA leadership meeting focused on the ever-tightening budget, opened the conversation by lamenting the fragile nature of the Slovak economy, which is dependent on exports for 85% of its GDP. Still, Slovakia's situation is more favorable than that of regional neighbors (e.g., Hungary), and Slobodnik expressed confidence in the conservative, well-regulated Slovak banking system (reftel) and the relative insulation provided by Euro adoption in January 2009. Looking toward April's G-20 Summit, Slobodnik stated frankly that Slovakia was a "hostage" to the major players. He expressed the view that the U.S. and the larger European partners should resist protectionist urges and fulfill pledges made at the Washington G-20 Summit.

Afghanistan

¶4. (C) Given the budgetary constraints imposed by the economic downturn, new Slovak commitments to Afghanistan are unlikely. But Slobodnik underscored that the GOS was

determined to fulfill its existing commitments, which should lead to about 250 assigned troops by June 2009. Now that Afghanistan is one of three priority countries for official development assistance (ODA), the Slovaks are also beginning to consider how to boost engagement on the civilian side. Slobodnik noted Slovakia's current legislative framework was not conducive to the deployment of non-military personnel. (FM Lajcak had previously told Charge the GOS was working on legislative proposals to facilitate greater civilian engagement.) Slobodnik said the GOS remains open to the potential deployment of Slovak Special Forces in 2010, as well to continued work on a potential Slovak-led OMLT. Slobodnik praised DefMin Baska for his stalwart commitment to protecting scarce MOD resources slated for overseas deployments, particularly in Afghanistan.

Kosovo

¶ 15. (C) On Slovak recognition of Kosovo, Slobodnik reiterated the well-known GOS position. While the GOS has no interest in "escalating" the situation, it also saw no immediate reason to reconsider its non-recognition policy. If the ICJ issues an opinion on the legality of Kosovo's independence declaration in 2010, Slobodnik said that many nations would carefully read the decision, but he was noncommittal beyond that. DAS Garber expressed disappointment that Slovakia planned to file an ICJ brief in support of Serbia, noting that the ICJ exercise would not change the fact that Kosovo was and would remain independent. She encouraged the GOS to utilize its good relations with the Serbs to counsel a

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realistic and constructive approach. (Comment: Slobodnik appeared to bristle slightly at this admonition and implied that Slovakia was, like the U.S., merely exercising its right to express its views. We continue to believe the heavy lifting on the issue of ICJ briefs -- and the larger question of recognition -- will be most effective with the Slovaks if done within EU channels.)

Energy Security and Russia

¶ 16. (C) Given the Russian-origin natural gas shutoff Slovakia endured in January, Slobodnik was pointed in calling for a robust EU policy on energy security. Although the Director General said the economic crunch made the exploration of many alternative energy possibilities too costly now, Slobodnik solicited ideas on how to improve Slovak energy independence and suggested a "constant line of strategic consultations" with the USG that could lead to concrete cooperation in new technologies. Action Request: This is the first time in our memory the GOS has sought a strategic dialogue with the U.S. on energy issues. We urge Washington agencies to respond favorably -- and as soon as possible -- to this request. Please advise. End Action Request.

¶ 17. (C) Slobodnik believes the Russians realized that the recent level of confrontation with the U.S. was unsustainable and were looking for an opportunity to dial down tensions; he is hopeful that the Obama Administration's new tone will help. He acknowledged, however, that Russia was a "difficult" partner that would always exploit perceived weaknesses. Slovakia doesn't fear a so-called "grand bargain" between the U.S. and Russia, he said, adding that Slovakia's situation -- like that of others in the region -- is more comfortable when U.S.- Russian relations are cooperative. At the same time, Slobodnik noted in a not-so-veiled jab at the Baltic States, the Poles and the Czechs, the Central and Eastern Europeans needed to keep a lid on their "hysteria" regarding Russia, otherwise they risked losing credibility with Western Europe on dealing with the region.

FM Lajcak's U.S. Visit

¶8. (C) Slobodnik concluded the meeting by reiterating Foreign Minister Lajcak's desire to visit Washington and meet with Secretary Clinton as early as possible. Slobodnik himself is looking forward to his own trip to Washington in the latter half of April. He added that Prime Minister Fico would also like to visit, a development which he characterized as something "new." Comment: Slobodnik's direct mention to Garber of a potential Fico visit adds yet another voice to previous, more generic statements we had heard about Fico's interest in traveling to the U.S. Charge will be meeting privately with Fico's foreign policy advisor later this month and will seek to nail down what the Slovaks have in mind.

End Comment.

EDDINS